

# Maria Raimunda's War\*

MARIA VALÉRIA REZENDE

Translators: Lígia Bezerra and Cecília Rodrigues

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Maria Raimunda never needed to read words on paper. Ever since she opened her eyes when she came into this world, she read everything there is to read in the book of things and people, inside and out, as far as the eyes can see. She learned early on that those with a gentle heart get beaten up in life and this lesson made her hot-headed! She's always been like that. Everyone is a little afraid of Maria Raimunda, but she is not afraid of anyone. She only fears God and the threat that she might soften up when she sees kids without mothers, men crying, children carrying other children in coffins, elderly people without a roof over their heads, hungry pregnant women with varicose veins, those kinds of things. But she actually prefers to be angry because anger gives you the courage and the strength to solve any problem that comes your way.

That's how Maria Raimunda likes to be, hard like *sucupira* wood: when people ask her for a favor, she puts on an angry face and says she isn't anybody's godmother, that she'll only do them a favor so they'll get out of her face; when she gives something to someone it's like she doesn't want to: she tosses a plate of food or small token like it has no use. She doesn't feel sorry for her children or her husband: if Antônio Pedro arrives home tipsy, she denies him dinner, locks the door, and leaves the poor man all night long out in the yard "cause the humid chill of the night and fasting are a good cure for drunkenness." People say her children's ears grew so big because of her disciplinary habit of pulling on them. They also say that when Antônio Pedro proposed to her, she answered bluntly: "What can I do? Women were born to suffer anyway." And yet everybody is always seeking her help, asking for her advice, asking her questions. She always replies, unwillingly, but she does. She knows everything. She doesn't care at all that they

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call her a macho-woman, for this gives her more authority. She does have a lot of authority, Maria Raimunda, and it's not just because of the size of the parcel of land that she inherited, deed and all, which nobody can touch and where she's the boss. This authority comes from within herself; she's always had it and it has grown a lot more since she led the war in Farinhada. Nobody would think that something so small, something so commonplace, would end up leading to such a war. Because the beginning of it all was the simple fact that Assis Tenório got some money from the government, called from Brasília, and told Adroaldo to buy a couple more calves, and as this resulted in a need for more pasture, he told Adroaldo to relay to Zuza Minervino and some others that they were to leave the land of Sítio Velho in eight days. Zuza had just finished hoeing the beans, the harvested plot was a beautiful sight, like it hadn't been in years, the hope for a good harvest was so great that he couldn't just leave the land like that. He had heard some things, some stories . . .

Father Franz had talked about conflicts over land, about people who would not leave their land and would end up winning over landowners and sugar mill owners because of a government law that poor people didn't even know about. Where to go with a heap of children and do what, if he could only plant, clean, and harvest? Live in the streets, in a slum, die of starvation with the whole family? In moments like this, one becomes very brave, because if one is to die anyway . . . Zuza told the others not to do anything and went to see the priest. The following night a lawyer sent by the bishop arrived; speaking very softly, at Father Franz's house, he explained to Zuza, to Manoel Justino, and to Isaías that indeed there was a law, that they had rights, but the law was only enforced with courage to face, to resist, to remain on the land without running away from threats. He talked about land reform and expropriation laws, about the Land Reform Institute and land ownership, so much stuff, so well explained that Zuza believed him. Father Franz reinforced everything by reading in the Bible that God had given land to everybody and much more, enough to astonish and to build up courage. That's when things got very serious, because Zuza, Manoel, and Isaías went from house to house, explaining everything and convincing others, except Givanildo, who early the next day went to the plantation owner's house to tell Adroaldo everything. From then on it was war: the armed henchmen surrounding the sharecroppers' parcel of land, the lawyer taking the situation to court, Adroaldo releasing the cattle to eat the

harvest, Father Franz calling the sharecroppers to help round up the cattle, the gunmen entering people's houses and breaking everything inside, the bishop saying on the radio that all of that was a sin against God, who was on the side of the poor, Assis Tenório coming back from Brasília in a hurry, saying that the priest and the bishop were communists, agitators, and the sharecroppers resisting, working only collectively, man, woman, child and elderly, not leaving anybody alone to fall victim to the enemy's attack.

They said Zuza was the leader. A lieutenant from Itapagi showed up with a document in hand stating it was a judge's order and demanded that the soldiers toss Zuza into the Farinhada jail, to serve as a lesson, so that everyone could hear his cries, while they beat him. And that's when Maria Raimunda, who had just been observing the chaos, who had nothing to do with it, safe on her parcel of land that nobody could take, got involved in the story. Maria de Zuza couldn't take it anymore, seeing her husband, the father of her children, a good man who had never set foot in a police station not even for drunkenness, arrested in that way and mistreated like a criminal. She went to see Father Franz, who told her God protected the poor, that she should put up with the situation, be patient, have courage. She no longer had either; she couldn't bear it. She went to her aunt's house seeking strength, for she had a solution for everything. Maria Raimunda saw Maria de Zuza crying, saw the bunch of children clinging to her, all crying, her big belly about to give birth to one more; she warded off her growing sorrow and made room for anger. She bathed, got dressed, grabbed a rosary, left home and went around to the neighbors, urging the women to gather because it was time to pray, and they all followed her, under the midday sun—such an odd hour to pray!—because it is difficult to resist Maria Raimunda's authority. When she arrived at the corner of the town square, by the jail, there were more than thirty women following her, wondering what Maria Raimunda was up to.

She stood right in front of the jail and started to sing a hymn, with the strongest voice she had, from deep down in her throat, nothing to do with the gentle singing Father Franz wanted to teach them. The singing increased at the same time, thirty voices more, fifty more, two hundred more, it echoed in the farmyards, in the waiting lines for the public water fountain and for the health center, in the communal laundry and in the kitchens, it rose to the plantation owner's house and

interrupted Assis Tenório's nap, penetrated Itapagi's main road, bounced off of the church tower and slipped into the mayor's office, went on to Guarabira, crossed the house of the bishop, who was not even there, he was already at the radio station stating that it was not right to oppress the poor, that God could hear the singing, while the singing itself moved on to Mari and to Sapé, took a turn at Vento Café, and roared in João Pessoa, the state capital, right at the main town square, woke up representatives who nodded off during a plenary session, drowned out judges' sentences at the courthouse, hurt the governor's ears, spread all around, expanding with the voices of all women who had ever felt injustice in life. And the musical prayer never silenced as evening fell nor did it when day broke, and it went on for more than a week.

They ordered Maria Raimunda to shut up, but in Farinhada's main square one could only hear the women singing. Preá was running around the square holding a clay pot of water and a gourd bowl, distributing water among the singing women or running from house to house gathering food to feed the improvised kitchen on the square. Three times a day Father Franz would go up the church stairway, dressed in his white alb and red stole, holding a silver cup filled with holy water in one hand and a sprig of rue in the other, walking through the crowd of women, sprinkling them with the sacred water. The blessing was meant to protect them so they wouldn't give up. Assis Tenório's men appeared, but the women paid them no mind, and besides, those brutes wouldn't beat up their own mothers who had joined in the singing. The Itapagi military police battalion were sent, dressed and armed for war. They besieged the square, shot into the air, but all they accomplished was to make the singing even louder: louder than the firing of the shots until there was no ammunition left and the soldiers, demoralized, starved and parched, accepted the water and the beans that the women gave them while carrying on with their singing. And so, this is the war that Maria Raimunda won when the authorities could no longer stand the agony of insomnia, so they decided to let Zuza go free, informed the judge, the Land Reform Institute, and who knows who else to hurry up, and then a committee from Brasília came and forced Assis Tenório to officially surrender the land to those who lived on it and farmed it. And then Farinhada was a quiet place again, the women went back to their homes, the governor took a week of vacation so he could sleep as much as he wanted, and Assis Tenório went back to Brasília fuming. When Zuza arrived, pulling the

purebred goat by a rope, to offer to Maria Raimunda as a gift, he heard: “Nonsense, Mr. Zuza, I don’t need no skinny goat, I didn’t do anything for you, I just had this intense urge to sing.”

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MARIA VALÉRIA REZENDE (1942–) é uma premiada escritora brasileira nascida em São Paulo e radicada em João Pessoa. Freira católica por formação, dedicou-se à educação popular e posteriormente à literatura. Sua obra inclui romances, contos, crônicas e livros infantis. Já recebeu o Prêmio Jabuti com o romance *Quarenta dias* (2015), o Prêmio São Paulo e Casa de las Américas com o romance *Outros cantos* (2016). A escritora é, ainda, uma das fundadoras do coletivo de escritoras brasileiras Mulherio das Letras, cujo impacto tem sido demonstrado por meio de publicações, encontros nacionais e filiais do coletivo em todas as regiões brasileiras e também em diferentes países.

LÍGIA BEZERRA é doutora em Literaturas e Culturas Lusófonas com subespecialização em Estudos Culturais pela Universidade de Indiana. Atualmente é professora de Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas e Culturas Latino-Americanas na Universidade Estadual do Arizona, onde atua também como diretora do Programa de Português. É autora de *Everyday Consumption in Twenty-First-Century Brazilian Fiction* (Purdue UP, 2022) e, como uma das co-fundadoras do Mulherio das Letras–Estados Unidos, co-organizou a coletânea bilíngue de poesia *Raíces: Brazilian Women Poets in Translation* (Venas Abiertas, 2022).

CECÍLIA RODRIGUES é doutora em Literaturas e Culturas Lusófonas pela Universidade de Massachusetts Amherst e trabalha como professora associada de Língua Portuguesa (PLE) e Literaturas Lusófonas na Universidade da Geórgia. É autora de *Além da ruína: Articulações da esperança na narrativa de Milton Hatoum* (Edições UFC, 2018). Como co-fundadora do coletivo Mulherio das Letras–Estados Unidos, organizou, junto a outras colegas, a coletânea bilíngue de poesia *Raíces: Brazilian Women Poets in Translation* (Venas Abiertas, 2022).